

The fires of jubilee essays examples

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



Stephen Oates' book *The Fires of Jubilee* tells the tale of the slave rebellion of Nat Turner, a moment that became one of the first shots across the bow for the American Civil War. Taking place in Southampton, Virginia in 1831, Nat Turner rallied dozens of fellow slaves to action, going from house to house and killing whites, freeing slaves in the process, causing one of the bloodiest slave revolts in American history. *The Fires of Jubilee* combines a straightforward retelling of the events of the Nat Turner rebellion with real historical nonfiction, creating an effective and comprehensive look at one of the more interesting events in American 19th century history.

Oates' book provides a great deal of context for the attitudes and thoughts of people living and working in 19th century Virginia. Whites in the South during that time were very proud of the state of slavery at the time; in Virginia, they believed they had struck a balance between bullying and violence and milder forms of coercion, feeling that slaves were grateful for what they had been given by their masters. While Virginians hated and despised more violent slave owners, they believed they had found a way to coexist with their slaves; to that end, they believed that the slaves were equally happy with the arrangement and willing to work together. However, this could not be further from the truth; slaves like Nat Turner were planning armed revolt for years leading up to the actual rebellions, as they did not want to be a part of the system that dehumanized them.

Nat Turner as a character is intriguing and passionate, characteristics elucidated upon in Oates' book. The book depicts him as almost like a Titan, a hardened warrior radically dedicated to his cause: " His fierce eyes, his broad shoulders, and brisk knock kneed walk made him seem larger than he

was" (Oates 67). Having illegally learned to read and write, Turner was a man of incredible skills for a slave in the 19th century - Turner read the Bible, and its passages that the whites used to legitimize slavery, and found that they were not adequate. Furthermore, he was intrigued by the other stories of freedom from slavery and their liberation at the hands of God. Combining the words of the Bible with his own life experiences, he interpreted these things as a sign that he needed to rise up and fight back against his oppressors. He saw himself as not unlike Moses, the prophet who led the Jews out of Egypt and freed them from slavery - he knew he would have to free his fellow slaves. Even Oates' writing depicts him in a decidedly spiritual way, showing him as being akin to God's wrath: " He was like a powerful angel whose wings were nailed to the floor" (Oates 41). While Oates does not shy away from Turner's brutality and horrific methods, as well as the people that he killed, Turner's own enigmatic and charismatic nature bleeds through in his elegant prose.

Oates tells the story of the rebellion with aplomb, providing a lot of interesting information to shed light on the events that led to the slave rebellion and its aftermath. The origins of the slave rebellion, it is revealed, are from an eclipse that Nat Turner saw in 1831: " For Nat, the eclipse was a sign of what he had been waiting for - could there be any doubt? Removing the seal from his lips, he gathered around him four slaves for which he had complete trust-Hark, Nelson, Henry, and Sam" (Oates 52). From his small band of friends and close allies, he started to gather his forces and started the revolt. Oates goes into great detail, with passionate and thrilling prose meant to put the reader in the action: " With a slight wind murmuring in the

darkness, the slaves set out by the light of torch, moving through the woods toward the Travis farm-the first target in their holy war against the white man” (Oates 69) . Oates also spends a lot of time discussing the white reaction to the revolt – as horrified as people were about Turner’s casualties and victims, slaves who were killed in retaliation to these attacks numbered far greater than Turner’s eventual body count. Also, as the rebellion continued, whites in Virginia feared that this smaller slave rebellion would lead to a larger uprising; they feared Northern intervention by the abolitionists was behind these revolts. To that end, more stringent slave codes were enacted in Virginia, thus making slaves even less free than before the rebellions started.

Evidently, Nat Turner’s rebellion did bear positive outcomes for the abolitionist movement; it, along with other factors, was the inspiration of a proposed emancipation bill from Governor Floyd (which stood a good chance of passing were it not for the last-minute intervention of John C. Calhoun). Given the slave revolts’ effect on Virginian attitudes toward slavery, and a decline in approval for the practice, Oates makes it clear that Nat Turner’s revolt came extremely close to changing history for the better. Even though the Turner slave revolts only lasted three days, they had an incredible impact on the institution of slavery in Virginia.

In conclusion, Stephen Oates’ *The Fires of Jubilee* is an important work in the study of the American South; documenting one of its more violent slave rebellions, the book offers a great deal of insight into how both white and black minds worked at the time, and the issues they cared about. Despite the discomfort that often comes from reading a book about such a sordid,

shameful part of American history, Oates does a commendable job of reminding us of the reasons these events happened. The nonfiction portion of the work is equally interesting, as it offers a glimpse into Oates' research of the Nat Turner tale. With his combination of exciting fiction prose (effectively dramatizing the work he is researching) and strict nonfiction research information, the book culminates in a fascinating look at one of the bloodier episodes of the antebellum South - a time when slaves were starting to get fed up with their lot and took violent steps to change it. The fact that it was so successful speaks to the changing of American attitudes in the South towards being more critical of slavery; furthermore, the fact that these slaves were driven to violent outburst showed the incredible desperation of slaves to escape from a horrible system that kept their inhumanity entrenched. Oates' account is both a dramatic retelling of these events and a strong research text on its real events.

Works Cited

Oates, Stephen. *The Fires of Jubilee*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.